

Chitimacha: A Mesoamerican language in the lower Mississippi valley

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Abstract

© 2014 by The University of Chicago. All rights reserved. The comparative method of historical linguistics is carefully applied to the hypothesis that Chitimacha, a language of southern Louisiana now without fully fluent speakers, and languages of the Totozoquean family of Mesoamerica are genealogically related. Ninety-one lexical sets comparing Chitimacha words collected by Swadesh (1939; 1946a; 1950) to words reconstructed for Proto-Totozoquean (Brown et al. 2011) show regular sound correspondences. Along with certain structural similarities, this evidence attests to the descent of these languages from a common ancestor, Proto-Chitimacha-Totozoquean. By identifying regular sound correspondences, the phonological inventory and some of the vocabulary of the proto-language are reconstructed. Reconstructed words relating to maize agriculture and the fabrication of paper indicate that prehistoric Chitimacha speakers migrated to the Lower Mississippi Valley from Mesoamerica. Some speculations on how and when Chitimacha speakers migrated are offered.

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Keywords

Chitimacha, Historical linguistics, Mesoamerican languages, Totozoquean, U.S. Southeast languages